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## THE ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS BETWEEN PROFESSIONALISM AND INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

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*Based on the book of Unmasking Administrative Evil, this review discusses the tension between professionalism and individual conscience in the context of a dichotomy. It is argued that neither professional standards nor individual conscience can be alone the framework for administrative ethics. This argument seems to consist with the conflict between the rational view and the anti-rational view which not only does shape the notion of administrative ethics, but it also influences the entire field of public administration through what is traditionally known as the politics-administration dichotomy.*

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**Keywords:** *dichotomy, administrative ethics, professionalism and individual conscience*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Adams and Balfour (2004) argue in their book *Unmasking Administrative Evil* that neither professional standards nor individual conscience can be alone the framework for administrative ethics. This argument seems to consist with the conflict between the rational view and the anti-rational view which not only does shape the notion of administrative ethics, but it also influences the entire field of public administration through what is traditionally known as the politics-administration dichotomy. This paper will put the tension between professionalism and individual conscience in the context of this dichotomy. Although both sides have some weaknesses, both of them have also strengths that should be counted. The main argument is that both professionalism and individual conscience are very important elements to be considered in terms of establishing a framework for administrative ethics.

### 2. THE RATIONALIST AND IRRATIONALIST VIEWS OF ETHICS

The roots of the tension between the rational view and the anti-rational view of life goes deeply back in the history when one reads what different philosophers wrote in the Enlightenment era (Adams and Balfour, 2004). Spicer (1995) recognizes many rational views of modern philosophers such as Rousseau, Comte, Mill, and Dewey who have influenced American public administration. On the other hand, other anti-rational philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Smith, and Burke besides the founders have their influence on public administration. By the influence of rationality, early writers in the field of public administration “emphasized the power of reason to order human affairs” (Spicer, 1995, p.27). Most the founders of the field such as Wilson, Goodnow, White, Taylor, Fayol, Mayo, Gulick, and Weber were rationalists. Only very few expectations such as Follett did not represent the rational view in public administration.<sup>1</sup> The rationalist view believes in the power of science and the ability of reason to reach reality. If reason is properly used, human behavior can be predicted and controlled. The anti-rational view believes in the role of human beings can never have the complete knowledge to control social order. Values and human experiences are critical elements to understand reality.

Not until the second half of the last century, when the anti-rational views have started to make more influence in the field by the work of Waldo *The Administrative State* in 1948. Then, additional anti-rational views have started to put stronger influence on the field such as the Minnowbrook conference of new public administration in the 1970s, Blacksburg Manifesto in the 1980s, and new public service in the new century. In fact, the major sign for the rational stream in public administration is the focus on the scientific approach to see public administration detached from the influence of politics. On the other hand, the anti-rational stream tends to focus on the attached influence of political values on public administration. These two different aspects move in parallel trends in the field to affect all the major issues including the role of professionalism and individual values in drawing the ethics in public administration.

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### 3. FRIEDRICH AND FINER DEBATE

Friedrich and Finer debate, in the beginning of 1940s, about the most effective way to ensure accountability of public officials in democratic system introduced the anti-rational paradigm shift in the field. This debate is an important figure in deciding whether professionalism or individual conscience has the superiority to draw the framework for administrative ethics. This importance is based on the fact the Friedrich and Finer debate referred to the role of professional standards and individual values in public accountability, which can be reflected in the same framework of administrative ethics. The tension between the rational view that advocates professionalism and the anti-rational view that supports the role of individual conscience, values, and politics can be clearly seen in this debate.

Friedrich (1940) believes that public officials can deal with administrative problems effectively through internal checks. These checks are created by professional standards and technical knowledge to ensure accountability. Thus, the professionals' responsibility cannot be held to politicians and elected legislators, but it should be to their colleagues who have the same technical knowledge and standards. One can imply from Friedrich's rational view that the complexity of public administration requires professionals to deal with ethical decisions because they are the only ones who have the knowledge to enclose the proper understanding of how to deal with ethical issues. Thus, professionalism is the appropriate framework to guide administrative ethics because its technical knowledge ensures the proper standards of ethics.

On the other hand, Finer (1941) thinks that external control by the elected legislators is the only way to maintain responsibility of officials in public administration. In general, Finer believes that public professionals cannot decide what is the appropriate action that ensures public good. Finer (1941) states that "the servants of public are not to decide their own course; they are to be responsible to the elected representative to the public" (p.7). Otherwise, the internal checks and control of professionals will lead, according to Finer, to corruption in public administration (Shafritz et al., 2004).

Based on Finer's anti-rational position, one may imply that the proper framework of administrative ethics cannot be built based on professionalism. The technical knowledge does not have the legitimacy to be the foundation of ethical public administration. These administrative ethics should be established through the legislative body that reflects the feelings, beliefs, and wishes of people. This argument opens the door to accept the role of individual conscience and values that belong to the same foundation. This argument can be clearer if we consider Rohr's (1986) understanding of representative bureaucracy, which meets, in a sense, the same purpose of representative democracy that the Founders intended to have. Based on this view, millions of people, who work in the bureaucratic body, represent themselves and participate in the government. This notion implies that these people have the constitutional legitimacy to use their individual conscience and values as foundation for ethical public administration.

### 4. FRAMEWORK FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS

Specifically, writers about ethics in public administration have been shaped by the two different main streams in terms of whether to depend on professional standards or on individual conscience to structure the administrative ethics. According to Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006), there is no agreement about the most effective method to handle the ethics in public affairs. The group that advocates for relying on professionalism to determine the framework of administrative ethics thinks that formal fixed codes that are built on technical knowledge will strengthen the role of ethics in public administration. Thus, to ensure the efficient performance of public administration, officials must follow goals, mission statements, rules, and regulations, which is the ethical instrument to distinguish between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. This group criticizes the people who believe in the role of individual conscience because of the subjectivity, uncertainty, and vagueness that it includes. Relying on individual conscience can lead to conflicts in public administration because public servants have different values. Thus, to avoid this conflict, public administration should build its ethical framework based on professional standards.

On the other hand, the group that supports the use of individual conscience as a foundation for ethical administration, according to Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006), believes that cultural, political and social environment besides the individual conscience play the critical role in deciding the administrative ethics. Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006) affirm that it "is public servant's internal moral character and individual conscience that is critical in ensuring that actions are ethical" (p.33). Chapman (1993) also considers the personal values of public officials as the most important element in administrative ethics. This group criticizes the reliance only on professional code of ethics because even because they do not help public administrators to deal with real situations.

Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006) clarify this criticism when they state that “while rules, regulations, and ethics codes of conduct are instrumental in educating, training, and orienting public servants toward an ethical posture, they do not adequately prepare them to handle issues associated with, say, conflicts of interest and discretionary authority” (p.34). Thus, individual conscience is the source of distinguishing what is right and what is wrong; and the assurance that guides professional codes of ethics. Based on this argument, public administration should build its ethical framework based on individual conscience.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In fact, the adequate framework for administrative ethics should be established based on a mixed approach that benefits from the advantages of each one, professionalism and individual conscience. Therefore, administrative ethics should reflect professional standards that ensure the “highest requirements of scientific work” (Friedrich, 1940). On the other hand, administrative ethics should also take in consideration the individual conscience of public officials because it is the actual source that helps officials to make judgments. In other words, public administrators cannot neglect neither professional standards nor conscience and values when they face ethical conflicts. There should be a trusted codes to guide public servants as well as an active conscience to help them and vice versa. If public officials miss a professional code of ethics, there will be no acceptable standards that help them to evaluate any conflict. The professional standards offer the appropriate basis to start. Also, if public administrators cannot use their individual judgment to deal with the professional codes, these codes can be misleading because they do not specify the right action for each specific case.

Waldo (2000) creates an effective map that presents the relationship between public administration and ethics. Based on this map public administrators should have strong obligations to self, democracy, general welfare, and humanity at the same time when they should have the same strong obligations to the Constitution, laws, organizational-bureaucratic norms, and professionalism. This is the appropriate balance that always should be observed in terms of ethical administration. In sum, both professionalism and individual conscience are very important components that should be considered if we want to establish an effective framework for administrative ethics.

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